

# Chua Banaag, Pastor (1909–2003)

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## MARY GRACE LADION-DE GUZMAN, AND RAY PUEN

Mary Grace Ladion-De Guzman taught at Lipa Adventist Academy for eleven years, the first established academy within the territory of South Central Luzon Conference. She is a licensed science teacher and holds a master's degree in Science Education. She is particularly interested in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education and staff development. Her husband, Marlon De Guzman, is a senior auditor for the South Central Luzon Conference. They have two children. Guzman is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Education with a specialization in Curriculum and Instruction from the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies.

Ray Puen is a retired minister and the son-in-law of Pastor Chua Banaag. Ray and Leni have served as church planters in seven countries and operated an independent ministry, New Life Mission, in Glendale, California. They often travel overseas to oversee the mission stations. The Puens also established Operation Vanguard, an organization that utilizes prayer to advance the Adventist mission. They have two grown children.

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Pastor Chua Banaag was a poet, religious freedom advocate, and church leader from the Philippines.

## Early life

Pastor Chua Banaag was born July 26, 1909, to Benito Chua and Emilia Banaag in Siniloan, Laguna, Philippines.<sup>1</sup> He was the third of nine children. His parents named him Pastor, for his mother hoped that he would become a gospel minister. His early life was characterized by the constant encouragement and Christian modeling of a godly mother. While a teen, he would come home from work as a stenographer at the Everett Steamship Lines<sup>2</sup> on Sabbath afternoons to attend Trozo Adventist Church's young people's meetings. There he met and was befriended by Jose Herrera, Antonio



Pastor Chua Banaag

Photo courtesy of Banaag family.

Abawag, and Eliseo Arevalo. Their friendship would become a deciding factor in his later conversion to Seventh-day Adventism.<sup>3</sup>

## Education and Marriage

Pastor Chua Banaag received his elementary education at Siniloan Elementary School, Laguna. He eventually earned a certificate from Underwood Business College in 1929 in stenography. At Trozo Adventist Church, he met the love of his life, Rosario Salazar Belmonte. They were united in marriage at the Knox Memorial Church on May 17, 1931.<sup>4</sup> Three years later, in 1934, as a result of the faithful prayers and intercession of his wife, he finally decided to join the Adventist faith and he was baptized by Pastor Roman Senson.<sup>5</sup> The union of Pastor and Rosario was gifted with eight children (three daughters died in infancy): Benjamin, Zenaida, Rosario, Ernesto, and Leni.<sup>6</sup>

## Ministry

Upon Pastor Chua Banaag's conversion to the Adventist faith, he left his job due to Sabbath-keeping issues. A door of opportunity opened to him to serve the Philippine Union Mission (PUM) as an office secretary.<sup>7</sup> Elder R. R. Fighur, the union president, interviewed him and gave him his first assignment.<sup>8</sup> He started his service for the denomination in August 1935. After four years and nine months as an office secretary, he was called to serve South-Central Luzon Mission (SCLM) as the director of the Sabbath School and lay activities departments,<sup>9</sup> which he did from May 1940 to April 1948.<sup>10</sup> As Sabbath School director, he appealed to Adventists in the United States for supplies of Sabbath School lesson quarterlies which the latter shared by sending the quarterlies to the Philippines.<sup>11</sup>

The eight years of ministry brought many wonderful experiences to him and his family. During the Second World War years, 1941 to 1945, the Philippines and the Adventist work were greatly affected. Pastor Ray Puen, Banaag's son-in-law, told of the memorable events in Pastor Chua Banaag's life during the Japanese occupation in the country.

On two occasions, Pastor C. Banaag almost lost his life. He and Pastor Manuel were taken to the commander's headquarters where they were accused of blowing up a bridge, a false accusation by someone who wanted to earn the reward of a sack of rice for turning in suspects. When they said they were Adventist pastors, the commander tested them by offering them cigarettes and some dancing women. They refused the offers, and the commander ordered that they be let go. He said, "These are Adventist ministers as they claim." How could he tell? His mother back home in Japan was an Adventist.

In the second instance, he was taken to the killing fields and, while lying face down, he heard and saw the Filipino captain and they recognized each other. He ordered him to be set free. Several years later it was Pastor

Chua Banaag's privilege to baptize Captain Bricio at a "Flight of Time" evangelistic crusade in San Pablo, Laguna. Captain Bricio gave this testimony: "I freed you from death by the guerillas, but you brought me salvation to free me from the death of sin."

As the havoc of war diminished, the Filipinos faced a time of severe crisis. The post-war period found thousands of people in poverty. The PUM leadership and the Seventh-day Adventist Church in general were active in distributing relief goods to people in need.<sup>12</sup> Slowly, the various activities and operations of the church resumed. The Bible says, this too "has passed away and ...new things have come" (2 Cor. 5:17).

During the 13<sup>th</sup> Biennial Session of the PUM, Pastor Chua Banaag was appointed the Sabbath School secretary of the union.<sup>13</sup> He was instrumental in providing reading materials for the war veterans who were confined and receiving treatment at V. Luna General Hospital, Manila. He wrote to H. K. Christman at the Pacific Press to ask for materials and he received 3,800 copies of *Signs of the Times* magazine.<sup>14</sup> He was also ordained as a minister in 1949. He served in the position from May 1948 to March 1951.<sup>15</sup>

He and his wife also ministered at the Women's Correctional Institute and Bilibid Prison. As a result of his ministry to prisoners, he secured a pardon for four convicts sentenced to death in the National Penitentiary. They were baptized and added to the Church rolls while in prison. Two other Adventist convicts were sentenced to die, and he witnessed their executions and arranged for their funerals. This was most touching to the other prisoners because executed criminals were given no funerals. But Pastor C. Banaag bought coffins and arranged for singers and funeral service, the first in that prison.<sup>16</sup>

In April 1951, Pastor Chua Banaag was called to serve the North Philippine Union Mission (NPUM) as the Sabbath School and home missionary secretary.<sup>17</sup> In 1952, he conducted a series of Sabbath School rallies in southern Luzon with R. C. Mills, the first American missionary to serve in the Philippines since the war.<sup>18</sup> This was to strengthen the work of the Sabbath Schools in the area and to strengthen the faith of the church members after the war. In April 1953, he reported 17,704 members of the Sabbath School and an offering of P122,089.38 pesos between 1951 and 1952.<sup>19</sup> Pastor C. Banaag shared various inspirational stories about young people investing their money with the Lord.<sup>20</sup> While still serving as the Sabbath School secretary of NPUM, he was appointed to lead the Central Luzon Mission (CLM) as president and as acting chairman of the North Philippine Union Mission from April to July 1954,<sup>21</sup> while the respective presidents attended the General Conference session.

Elder H. E. McClure headed a laymen's conference in Northeast Luzon Mission (NLM), Santiago, Isabela, from June 21 to 25, 1955. He teamed up with P. C. Banaag, B. B. Buck, and M. C. Warren to train lay preachers for mission. The training called for both men and women to dedicate their lives to preaching and literature ministry.<sup>22</sup>

In April 1956, Pastor C. Banaag returned to SCLM to lead as the seventh president since its establishment in 1931.<sup>23</sup> His leadership was characterized by various activities in his territory and PUM. Among these activities

were youth congresses,<sup>24</sup> teachers' workshops,<sup>25</sup> lay preachers' institutes,<sup>26</sup> and Pathfinder camps. Through these efforts many souls were led to Jesus. He held the presidency until December 1962.<sup>27</sup>

He was called again to serve NPUM in January 1963 as the secretary of the Sabbath School and religious liberty departments. He replaced Juanito Cristobal, who had perished with his passengers in a VW in a terrible traffic accident.<sup>28</sup> Eventually, in 1965, he directed the SDA Welfare Service (SAWS), as well as the Religious Liberty Association of the Philippines. He was also executive secretary of the Temperance Association of the Philippines and the National Executive Committee for Alcoholism Prevention.<sup>29</sup>

As the executive secretary of the Religious Liberty Association of the Philippines, serving both the North and South Union Missions,<sup>30</sup> he was actively involved in supporting every Filipino's right to practice his personal beliefs and religious preference. Banaag, along with W. M. Adams, R. C. Williams, B. B. Alsaybar, and T. C. Murdoch, paid a visit to the office of Senator Camilo Osias, president of the Philippine Senate in 1967, expressing their support for the separation of church and state and for not imposing the teaching of Catholicism in public and private schools. He was also the creator and editor of the first Adventist magazine outside the United States that advocated religious freedom—it was named *Freedom*.<sup>31</sup> Since the publication of *Freedom*, he received lots of letters from prominent people in the government and church. In 1966, after receiving a letter from Carlo Martini, a papal representative in the Philippines, Pastor Chua Banaag visited him and was warmly welcomed. He befriended Carlo Martini and, in return, was granted permission to publish in *Freedom* the view of the Catholic Church on ecumenism.<sup>32</sup>

Pastor Banaag also met Chief Justice Earl Warren who traveled to the Philippines for the Philippine Constitution Association. They compared the *Liberty* magazine (produced in the USA) and *Freedom* magazine. *Freedom* magazine was circulated in the Philippine archipelago and various commendations reached the office of Pastor C. Banaag for its profound principle of exercising religious liberty. Among those was the compliment of the Philippine President Diosdado Macapagal who stated that religious liberty is “the fundamental law of the land.”<sup>33</sup>

Among the recipients of the *Freedom* magazine were schools, judges, senators, and other people in high places. The issues were free of charge. On a few occasions, the magazine was credited with influencing a decision on current issues. Some senators requested permission to quote from it. That would have been expected since Pastor Chua Banaag had also persuaded influential thought leaders<sup>34</sup> like Senators Rector, Yulo, Oseas, Roxas, Diokno, Manglapus, and Salonga to write for the publication.

In 1968, Pastor Chua Banaag became the only Filipino member of the Church-State Commission which was jointly organized by the General Conference Religious Liberty Department and Andrews University.<sup>35</sup> That commission toured the Middle East and Europe,<sup>36</sup> and P. C. Banaag had the privilege of speaking<sup>37</sup> in different churches in Russia, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, and other Communist countries. There were big strides in the direction of waving the flag for religious liberty and Pastor C. Banaag waved it vigorously. Nor was it surprising

that when he addressed a committee of Congress on the issue of religious liberty, he was accorded a standing ovation. In the eyes of mission workers, he was perceived as Mr. Religious Liberty. To others, he was Mr. PR and Mr. Freedom.

## Later Life

In 1973, Pastor Chua Banaag retired to California and there he was asked to pastor a newly-formed group that became the Glendale Filipino SDA Church. A church building was acquired under amazing circumstances after he called for a Sabbath of fasting and prayer. A church was sold to them for only the land value and the parking problem was solved when the monsignor of the Catholic Church next door agreed to give the church the free use of their parking lot "until Jesus comes." The offer was formalized into a contract. Pastor Chua Banaag passed away on January 18, 2003, at the age of 93.

## Contribution and Legacy

Among his contributions to the church and the nation were his religious liberty leadership in the Philippines, his explorations of the subject in the contexts of other countries, and his speaking of its importance to the church members and to other people. Also notable was his publishing of the *Freedom* magazine, where he upheld the separation of church and the state. He became a founding member and adviser to the organization, Partnership in Evangelism of the Philippines, under the direction of his eldest son, Benjamin. His nephew, Ireneo Banaag Jr., continues the work in the correctional institute. Grandson Garry Mupas ministers at the Loma Linda Filipino Church.

Whether composing poetry as a *makata* (poet) or calling on the congregation to support a conference initiative, Pastor Chua Banaag always seemed to be able to rise to the occasion. The principle on which he seemed to operate was: "When you do what's important to the Lord, He'll do what's important to you." His ministry left a lasting influence on the Adventist Church in the Philippines.

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